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TIMES EDITORIALS

Too Many Back Seat Drivers

When Joseph S. Farland resigned as ambassador to Panama, he said he'd "stepped on a few toes" in criticizing "glaring defects" in the Latin American aid program.

Anybody who wondered why a U.S. ambassador should feel obliged to resign because he had trod on a few bureaucratic bunions in Washington could have had his answer the next day when Sen. Jackson's subcommittee issued another of its studies on what the senator calls the "struggle to put U.S. ambassadors in the driver's seat of U.S. missions abroad."

A U.S. ambassador ought to be the supervisor of all American representatives in the country to which he is accredited. He is, after all, the personal representative of the President of the United States, who is charged by the Constitution to conduct our foreign affairs.

But since the war Washington has sent innumerable representatives abroad—foreign aid specialists and dispensers, military advisors to allied countries, labor experts, CIA agents, extraordinary delegates for this purpose or that, plus a mixed bag of busybodies with innumerable special missions. Many of them have direct strings to Washington. Some of them act almost as envoys plenipotentiary. Few of them do much more than observe basic amenities with the U.S. ambassador to the country in which they are operating, although the ambassador theoretically is their principal.

When an energetic and successful ambassador tries to assert his prerogative, or to give pointed advice to such floating emissaries or their directors in Washington, he may be ignored at the least, and at the worst reprimanded in such fashion that he expresses his frustration by resigning or by surrendering and drifting with the innocuous current of the State Department careerists.

Apparently Farland quit in some such circumstances. He was sent to Panama by President Eisenhower at a difficult time and held over by President Kennedy because he had re-established good relations with the Panamanians. When Alliance for Progress funds were being allotted, he felt that Panama should have somewhat more and for different projects. But his suggestions were ill-received in Washington. That's when he "stepped on a few toes."

And he made a case for Sen. Jackson's next study in the "struggle to put U.S. ambassadors in the driver's seat" again.

The President can always remove an ambassador who proves to be a poor "driver." But when he has competent knowledge of the country to which he is accredited, he shouldn't be compelled to yield in authority or judgment to a host of back-seat drivers. He has a higher function than giving cocktail parties on the Fourth of July, and U.S. affairs abroad will suffer as long as he is prevented from exercising it.